UNITED NATIONS

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Secretariat

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ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUCTION

To: Members of the staff

From: The Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management

Subject: EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE IN CASES OF ALCOHOL/SUBSTANCE ABUSE*

INTRODUCTION

1. The Organization recognizes alcohol and substance abuse as progressive illnesses for which effective treatment and rehabilitation are available that can lead to full recovery. It is concerned about the negative effects of such illnesses on a staff member's health and work performance and will therefore provide counselling and, when necessary, referral for appropriate treatment to staff affected by these illnesses. A staff member referred to these services or seeking help as a self-referral will be treated with dignity and respect and will be afforded the same consideration as staff having other illnesses or disabilities.

2. The purpose of the present administrative instruction is to state the policy of the Organization regarding staff affected by these illnesses and to establish related guidelines and procedures. Detailed procedures for United Nations offices away from Headquarters will be issued separately, as appropriate.

3. Full confidentiality and privacy will be ensured when a staff member seeks assistance with an alcohol or drug-related problem. A staff member's involvement in any phase of a treatment programme will be kept strictly confidential.

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* Personnel Manual index No. 13215.

4. Staff members will not suffer any career discrimination as a result of seeking advice or assistance in this area and job security will not be jeopardized by staff members' contact with related services.

5. The goal of the Organization is to ensure that policies, guidelines and procedures are implemented in such a way that staff members themselves will be encouraged to seek help as promptly as possible and that they receive appropriate assistance without delay.

I. SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE

6. Some staff members may prefer to take action outside the Organization, and may find that the most appropriate source of assistance for them is a self-help group such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Al-Anon (for family and friends), ACOA (for adult children) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA). They may also contact directly the facilities and programmes covered by their health insurance plan.

7. The United Nations health insurance plans provide certain benefits for the treatment of substance (alcohol and/or drug) abuse on both in-patient and out-patient bases. Summaries of the health insurance plans are contained in the related information circulars.

8. Within the Organization, the Staff Counsellor's Office will be available for assistance and support at all times. It will be the focal point for staff at offices away from Headquarters, as appropriate, until the detailed procedures mentioned in paragraph 2 have been developed.

9. In order to facilitate timely and appropriate action, individuals qualified in intervention and referral will assist the Staff Counsellor's Office on a strictly confidential basis. These persons may be administrative, management and/or staff union personnel, or members of AA and NA or certified professionals.

10. Support will also be available in the form of basic training programmes for concerned staff who need information on the nature of alcohol/substance abuse, its impact on behaviour at work and effective methods for dealing with it.

II. IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEM

11. If a staff member is in fact struggling against alcohol/substance abuse, the most effective response is appropriate guidance, support and treatment. This is best accomplished through informal channels, except in the most extreme cases.

12. In many instances, individuals may themselves recognize that they are suffering from a situation directly related to alcohol/substance abuse. As

mentioned above, they may seek outside sources of help. They may also contact the Staff Counsellor's Office (self-referral) for confidential counselling, support and assistance in identifying appropriate and affordable treatment alternatives compatible with their medical insurance plan. These self-referrals allow for the most effective and efficient response as staff can be provided with appropriate support and treatment without any administrative action.

13. In other cases, staff members may not feel they have a problem or the need for assistance, even though family members, colleagues or supervisors may be concerned by a steady deterioration in behaviour, personal relationships or work performance. This type of deterioration is often observed over a period of weeks or months and may not seem to be clearly related to any known personal circumstances or to factors in the work environment. Furthermore, staff may not respond positively to observations, suggestions or offers of assistance from friends or supervisors.

14. While it may be quite appropriate and prudent to consider the possibility of alcohol/substance abuse, it must be recognized that this is a complex and delicate situation where vague statements, insinuations or casual diagnoses are not effective. Family members, colleagues or supervisors who wish to help should immediately seek confidential advice from the Staff Counsellor's Office. Possible courses of action will be considered and qualified persons will be contacted, as appropriate.

III. PROCEDURES FOR PROVIDING ASSISTANCE

15. When staff members themselves do not ask for help, the situation is much more complex and calls for a responsible and balanced approach. The following steps should guide all those involved in an official capacity.

A. Step 1: Informal discussions with the staff member

16. This is an essential first step in providing assistance. Although many different approaches may be considered, they will always involve, as early as possible, conversations between the staff member and concerned, qualified persons. These informal discussions may involve colleagues, close friends, family members or professional counsellors. They should lead to a common understanding of the problem and an agreement on a realistic plan of action. In many cases, this informal approach, in conjunction with appropriate follow-up and support, will lead to recovery. Situations may thus be handled discreetly and successfully outside the work context and may not call for the presence of a supervisor.

17. However, supervisors often have a key role to play in early detection and effective response. As they are primarily responsible for the monitoring of work and for ongoing discussions on performance, they are in a position to

detect early signs of difficulties and to react promptly with informal feedback.

18. In cases where deterioration in work performance might jeopardize employment status, it will be necessary to begin the process with an informal discussion with the supervisor and the Staff Counsellor, who will present a clear picture of performance criteria, expected behaviour changes and deadlines, as well as rights and responsibilities under the Staff Rules and Regulations. The presence of the supervisor will help to ensure that administrative or disciplinary actions are not inappropriately initiated while a staff member is actively engaged in corrective action. The Staff Counsellor and the supervisor will take note of the date of this discussion, but no record will be placed on the staff member's official status file.

19. The situation will be reviewed no more than three months after this informal discussion, to ensure that reasonable progress has been made. Further informal discussions may be held to follow up on progress, as appropriate. Once the problem has been resolved, no further action will be required.

B. Step 2: Formal meetings with the staff member

20. However, if the problem behaviour and/or performance has not been addressed appropriately by the staff member after three months, a formal meeting must be held without further delay. This will again involve the Staff Counsellor and the individual's supervisor as well as any other person required by the circumstances, such as a staff representative or a personnel officer. The purpose is to advise the staff member officially of the problem that has been identified and to describe the corrective measures that are applicable within the framework of the Staff Rules and Regulations. A record of this meeting will be placed on the staff member's official status file. This record will not contain any allusion to alcohol/substance abuse or to any other diagnosis, unless formally requested by the staff member, but will be very specific in terms of the problem performance and/or behaviour observed on the job.

21. The staff member will also be advised that he/she must take the initiative to seek an expert third-party evaluation of his/her condition. The staff member will be required to remain in contact with the Staff Counsellor's Office, which must be satisfied that an appropriate evaluation was carried out and also that recommended treatment, if any, is being followed.

22. At this stage, all actions must be focused on facilitating the staff member's recovery and professional reintegration. The role of the Staff Counsellor's Office will be to provide confidential support and monitoring of treatment. With the knowledge of the staff member, those who have been involved in the formal meeting will be informed that appropriate action is being taken by the staff member. All efforts will be made to provide the discreet, respectful and flexible working environment that is essential to effective treatment and recovery.

23. It is expected that, in most cases, the formal meeting described above will result in recovery of healthy behaviour and acceptable level of performance within a few months. When the problem performance and/or behaviour has been corrected, a final meeting will be held and the positive results recorded in the staff member's official status file.

C. Step 3: Action required in extreme cases

24. In some cases, the staff member may refuse evaluation and treatment and the problem behaviour is not corrected. If this is the case, a maximum of three months will be allowed after the first formal meeting and a second formal meeting will be held. The question of applicable disciplinary/administrative actions, including separation, may be considered and the administration's position should be clearly established. A report of this meeting will also be placed in the staff member's official status file, documenting the fact that the staff member is still not carrying out normal functions within acceptable work standards and in line with the Standards of Conduct in the International Civil Service. If, however, there is an agreement on actions to be taken by the staff member, or deadlines established, this should also be documented. Further formal meetings should not be excluded when progress can be reasonably expected. If this leads to a resolution of the problem, a final meeting will be held and the positive results recorded in the staff member's official status file.

25. However, if progress continues to be unsatisfactory, a determination must eventually be made that further formal meetings would not be advisable or necessary. A meeting will then be held with the staff member to advise him/her of the Organization's final position. A record of this meeting will be placed in the staff member's official status file stating that all reasonable efforts have been made to assist the staff member in obtaining appropriate help and in correcting performance problems, and that appropriate administrative actions will now be initiated.

26. Should the procedures outlined in paragraphs 15 to 25 above fail to produce acceptable results within one year, it will generally be in the interest of the staff member, as well as the Organization, that normal disciplinary/administrative procedures be applied appropriately and without further delay. While this may become necessary in extreme cases, all those intervening in the process should be guided by the primary objective of the present policy, which is to assist staff members so that their illness is treated and they recover their normal health and productivity instead of facing disciplinary/administrative action.